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Howard Jacobson's *The Making of Henry* — The World of *Yiddishkeit* in Britain —

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ハワード・ジェイコブソン作 『ヘンリーの成長』
— イギリスにおけるユダヤ文化の世界 —

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ハワード・ジェイコブソン (1942 ~) は文字通りイギリスを代表する現代ユダヤ系作家である。彼自身も主張しているように、決して敬虔なユダヤ教徒ではない。しかし、彼の作品には宗教性を感じさせる要素が強く感じられるのも事実である。その理由の一つは、ジェイコブソンの生まれた環境にある。イギリスのマンチェスターに住みながらも英語を話さずにイディッシュ語で生活をしていた祖父母たちのユダヤ文化の影響を強く受けていた。彼の多くの作品には、イディッシュ語表現がしばしば見られる。ユダヤ人独特なユーモアもそうしたイディッシュ語表現には込められているのだ。本論では、ジェイコブソンが捉えるユダヤ精神というものがいかなるものなのかを『ヘンリーの成長』(2004)を中心に分析し、その一端を具体的に示すことができればと思う。

キーワード：ユダヤ文化 (イディッシュユカイト)

I. Izzi Nagel, a type of *Luftmentsh*

Howard Jacobson was born in Manchester, England in 1942, and raised in Prestwich, a town within the Metropolitan Borough of Bury, in Greater Manchester. He reflects upon his childhood in his novel *Kalooki Nights*, "Thus did I grow up in Crumpsall Park in the 1950's, somewhere between the ghettos and the greenery of North Manchester, with 'extermination' in my vocabulary and the Nazis in my living room" (Jacobson, *Kalooki Nights* 5). The migration of Jewish families to Prestwich, mainly from the nearby Cheetham area of Manchester and Broughton Park in Salford, resulted in the construction of synagogues, such as the Heaton Park Hebrew Congregation.

Historically speaking, Manchester played an important role as a major Jewish settlement by 1919.

Key Words: *Yiddishkeit*

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By 1919, the Jewish population had increased from 46,000 in 1880 to about 250,000, who lived primarily in the large industrial cities, especially London, Manchester and Leeds. Manchester and neighbouring Salford, were also areas of heavy Jewish settlement. The Jewish community in England generally embraced assimilation into wider English culture. They started Yiddish and Hebrew newspapers. Immigration was eventually restricted by the Aliens Act of 1905, following pressure from groups such as the British Brothers League. The 1905 legislation was followed by the Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act of 1919¹. (Godley chap 1)

Henry Nagel, the first-person narrator and protagonist of Jacobson's *The Making of Henry* (2004), was born and raised in Manchester. The novel is filled with Jewish humor and such colorful Yiddish expressions as "Oy gevalt"² (43), "mensch"³ (326), "schlepped his kishkes out"⁴ (330), and they effectively evoke the past Yiddish-speaking Jewish community in Manchester. In contrast to Godley's generalization of the Jewish community's positive assimilation, Jacobson illustrates a uniquely closed Yiddish-speaking people throughout this novel. Unlike his *Kalooki Nights* and *The Finkler Question* (2010), *The Making of Henry* is more focused on the theme of *Yiddishkeit* (Jewishness and Jewish faith), without referring to the Nazis, Israel, and anti-Semitism.

Izzi Nagel is the Yiddish *luftmentsh*⁵ -type father of Henry Nagel. The following introduction of Izzi illustrates well his particular *Yiddishkeit* upbringing in Manchester, most probably based on the author's own experiences.

His father lived out of time, not in the past but on some other plane where there was neither past nor future. His father's parents had barely learned to speak a word of English though they'd been born in Manchester and lived there all their lives. Yiddish did them. Yiddish sufficed. In Yiddish they thought they were invisible to their enemies. Like the ostrich. (146)

It is clearly suggested that those Yiddish-speaking East European Jews did not show any interest in intermingling with the dominant English culture. Their denial of English culture in Britain exemplifies their isolated Jewish / Yiddish identity being markedly different from that of the influential and affluent American Jews. Historically speaking, Jewish communities had been accused of being a "state within the state in Prussia" (Batnitzky 16), because they had refused to be integrated into the local culture.

Following his ancestors, Izzi lives in Manchester like an ostrich or Yiddish *luftmentsh*. Thus, the traditional *Yiddishkeit* (Jewish faith) determines his way of life and his value system. Unlike the American Jews, the Yiddish-speaking British Jews could not identify themselves with the British national identity, or they did not even attempt

to be British.

'In America the Jews had taken on a version of the national identity, had made the American cause their own, had even shaped it. . .' (146)

It is true that Jewish American writers are not confined to the adopted American culture, but they are free to argue about American life and even American politics, as graphically illustrated in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), in which Roth openly criticizes the unfair and discriminatory American attitude toward Jews through his work and shows an ideal American hero through a poor American Jew's heroic deeds. Though Jacobson is often compared with Roth, he is much more reserved as a British writer than his American counterpart,

Henry, the protagonist of *The Making of Henry*, was always proud of his mother, because she seemed to be far more sophisticated than his father, and, in fact, she was fascinated by Nietzsche. His attachment to his mother can be compared to Alexander Portnoy's mother complex in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*. In his biographical work *Roots Schmoots—Journeys Among Jews* (1994), Jacobson humorously refers to Jewish mothers:

Every Jewish son knows that his mother encourages his guilt only in order that she should have more sin to suffer for herself. Here is why Jesus will never catch on amongst us. We already have a savior /redeemer /martyr at home. (219)

On the contrary, Henry's father was only an upholsterer and an amateur magician and fire-eater at children's birthday parties. As is common among Yiddish-speaking Jews, Izzi has a good sense of humor. While practicing his fire-eating, Izzi accidentally killed every fish in a small backyard pond. Ekaterina angrily admonished her husband about it.

'By in shock I mean suffering the aftermath of shock.'

'How do you know it was shock?'

Ekaterina was adamant. 'So what else do you think it was?'

'Fish die. That's life.'

'Not six, all at the same time, Izzi.'

'I think I've read,' he said, 'that the death of one fish can deprive others of the will to live.' (184)

When Henry was nine years old, he was scolded by his father for his misbehavior. Izzi asked his son to buy something at Yoffeys's shop, and he was supposed to return to him three pence change, but Henry lost the coins in the shop and came home without

the change. It was simply because his school friend was sitting at the cash register and Henry was too proud to ask his friend to look for such small lost change as three pence.

The following dialogue between Izzi and Henry, when his son asked him years later, tells us more about the Jewish father's sense of values.

'For your own good, Henry, we sent you back to Yoffeys's. We pished⁶ on the three pence, but couldn't allow the world to pish on you.'

'So all this you did for love of me?'

'All this we did for love of you. To make you strong.' (16)

It is obvious that Izzi was not interested in getting back the small change, but he tried to encourage his son to gain spiritual strength. On the contrary, Ekaterina, his mother, tried to protect her sensitive son:

'Henry has thin skin, you know, not like his father who has the hide of an elephant—which I mean he feels everything even before it's happened, and has no protection against consequences.' (21)

It is a unique comparison between "thin skin" and "the hide of an elephant." Izzi believed that his son should learn to be strong and independent in whatever situation Henry might face in the future.

Before marriage, Ekaterina Stern (Henry's mother's maiden name) mistook Izzi's dream of becoming "a fire-eater" for "fire-fighter" (49) and married him. She was always concerned that her husband might be hurt while performing as an illusionist. However, while cooking Ekaterina also dropped cans into boiling water and then forgot about them until the water boiled away and the kitchen filled with the smell of roasting metal. Eventually the cans exploded. Reflecting upon them, Henry amusingly thought in his later years that both his parents were "pyromaniacal" (55).

II. Henry's secret effeminateness and the meaning of sex

Most parts of *The Making of Henry* are composed of Henry's reminiscence about his childhood experiences, and reflections on his present situation when he is almost sixty. In the process of narration, Henry's late father Izzi pops in and out, leaving important messages to his son in his imagination. Upon graduating from Cambridge, Henry got a position at a university, but he felt regretful: "I've cocked up my life" (166). To understand what he means here, we have to remember what his father said to Henry. "Be a man, Henry. Be a man and stand up for men" (166). Izzi had been the only person who referred to his effeminateness before "Hovis" Belkin made fun of him when they were at grammar school.

Since his childhood, Henry was brought up keeping his "thin skin." His

upbringing contributed to forming his effeminate personality: his mother, grandmother and grandaunts absolutely doted on Henry until he became effeminate and overly sensitive. In this respect, he has some affinity with Felix Quinn, the romantic and sentimental protagonist of *The Act of Love* (2008). He became conscious about it and he joked about it in a letter to “Hovis,” as if he tried to cover up his inferiority complex by revealing it to his friend.

‘Textually, or I might even mean textologically, I am entirely in my element. All I need to do is wear a frock and cut my dick off and the prize is mine.’ (166)

This “Hovis” Belkin was the student who mercilessly called Henry a “girl,” and in fact, Henry was deeply hurt by his insulting epithet. As is hinted, this contributed to his having a miserable life even after he obtained a university position.

When Henry learned about Belkin’s death years later, he actually felt relieved from his long nightmare. This namby-pambyism was caused by his strong inferiority complex. He tried to hide it from others, but his friend Belkin found it out. Because he could not drive a car, Henry was also suspected: “You a faggot? (74)” His old friend “Hovis” and Izzi pointed out Henry’s effeminateness: “They impugned his masculinity. They called him a girl” (79). Even though his inclination was somewhat effeminate, he did not show any sign of being homosexual. In fact, he preferred to make love with much older women, like Marghanita, his grandmother’s sister, even when he was a twenty-year old college student.

Henry’s theory of sex is expounded as follows:

[S]ex has always been his only chance, the one area, for some reason he can’t explain, where he can find a little ease. It’s his theory that many men who have been thought of as predatory sexually have wanted peace, that’s all, a period of relief, not from sexual tension, but from reserve. (110)

This is an understandable interpretation of sex as a “relief from reserve.” It is highly possible that Henry’s intimacy with Marghanita had something to do with his sexual inclination of “having sex with older women” (113). This was exactly the case with Lia, Henshell’s wife—Henshell was his second-best school friend after “Hovis.” He tried to replace his quest for his mother with affairs with much older women. Finally, Henry discovered Ekaterina’s real sexuality by chance, as will be discussed later.

Moiria Aultbach, a married waitress, who was working with her husband as a restaurant owner, became intrigued by Henry’s sexual drive.

Now, as he moves in on his second childhood, his idea of sex is returning to that earlier, more primitive form. Talk, holding hands, companionability, the condition

of being chums, before or after or even in the absence of coition. (275)

In this respect, Moira seems to replace his mother Ekaterina by accepting Henry's mother-complex.

III. Izzi and Ekaterina—Henry's final awakening

Henry's father Izzi appeared in the beginning as a wandering *luftmentsh* in contrast to his mother Ekaterina, illustrated as an ideal person. Izzi was not serious in making a living for his family. He was even caught by his wife when he was having an affair. Ekaterina told her only son Henry:

'I saw him going into the hotel and I saw the woman he was with. . . I am concerned that your father should take such a plain woman to the Midland Hotel.' (59)

The woman was Mr. Yoffey's ugly wife. Ekaterina's emphasis was not on the "affair" itself but instead on the embarrassment of her husband's taking a "plain woman" to a hotel. She seemed more concerned about who her husband was with than what he was doing. In any case, readers are guided by Henry's narration into seeing a negative image of his father in the beginning. However, Izzi is spotlighted quite differently at the end of the novel.

When Henry met Moira, she was married. Although their sexual relationship had already ended, she and her husband maintained a successful business partnership.

For some reason, Henry was drawn to Moira, and he honestly confessed to her his inferiority complex of being effeminate.

'I am not sure that I'm in the right league for you. I don't do cars. I don't do football. I don't personalize number plates. I don't do slavery. I don't even do pastry. In a few months I will be eligible for a senior railcard. All I can offer are cut-price trips to the seaside. Shall we call a halt to it now, before pity enters?'(94)

Being afraid of losing Moira in future, Henry told her the truth in advance. Unexpectedly, Moira accepted Henry as he was, and their relationship became closer as a result of his honest confession. Through her, Henry became acquainted with the secrets of his mother.

As mentioned, Henry's somewhat perturbed psychology was formed by his mother's home education. Ekaterina did everything for her son in order to get rid of every possible trouble that might torment him in the future.

If he allows her, she will pull him down with her into the blackness, where she

can shield him from all harm. Keep the clanging world away from him. And have him in an early grave. (43)

She was a stereotypical overprotective and overcontrolling “Jewish mother.” When Henry left for Cambridge, Ekaterina said to Izzi, “Go through with him. Make sure he’s got his ticket and settle him on the train” (130). She also led him to his study of literature at college. Henry’s father, on the contrary, advised his son “to see the world” (33).

With Moira, Henry visited Eastbourne, and there he serendipitously discovered a bench dedicated to Ekaterina. Thereafter, he was intrigued to investigate who dedicated it to his late mother. In the end, he uncovered his mother’s secret and finally understood his father.

It was his mother who broke the conjugal relations by having a love affair with an Arab, and Henry’s prejudice against his father was corrected to a great extent. Reading a neighbor’s diary referring to Ekaterina, Henry learned that his mother lived a lie.

His mother had a lover—of course she had. Fouad Yafi: that’s the only detail which is truly a surprise to him. . . . ‘Food, she [Ekaterina] calls him [Yafi]. But bills addressed to Fouad. Not so mournful when you get to know him.’ (312)

Since this surprising fact was revealed to him, Henry admitted that he was wrong in his evaluation of his father.

‘[H]e was a man of immense reserves of decency, sympathetic decency, and would have wanted his wife happy even in her faithlessness, would have wanted her loved by someone kind, treated with consideration, remembered fondly, a credit to them both. (324-5)

Thus, Henry came to realize how his own prejudice toward Izzi had distorted his father’s real image.

While he was deeply hurt by discovering his mother’s secret, Henry was saved by Moira’s “rigorous protection of his feelings” (326). As a result, he finally realized what Izzi had told him: “Be a man, Henry. Be a man and stand up for men” (166).

Thank you, God, for finding me such a person. Now organize for me to live for ever with her (Moira) and You’ll be a mensch. (326)

This is a very cynical message from Howard Jacobson about the meaning of God for men. He dares to compare God with “a mensch” (literally a man in German). In Yiddish, *mensch* (מענטש) means “a person of integrity.” A *mensch* is someone who is responsible,

has a sense of right and wrong and is the sort of person other people look up to. In English the word has come to mean “an upright, honorable, decent person” (Rosten 232).

Unquestionably, Izzi meant “*mensch*” by “Be a man, Henry.” In Yiddish, “Zay a *mensch*” (be a man) is well-known set phrase addressed from a father to his son. Having fully understood his mother’s secret, Henry came to the conclusion that Izzi was the embodiment of “*mensch*.” With Moira’s suggestion, Henry decided to dedicate “a bench” to his father, which should be placed by the side of his mother’s bench. Henry remembered how hard his father had worked. “At his upholstery, at his fire-eating, at being married . . . and certainly at being Henry’s father” (330).

Because Izzi loved the Yiddish word for intestines (*kishkes*), Henry humorously imagined the dedication to put on the bench, believing it best fit:

In Memory of Izzi Nagel Who Whatever Else There Is To Say *Shlepped*⁷ His *Kishkes*⁸ Out For me—His loving son. (330)

The meaning contained in the title of *The Making of Henry* is this final phase of Henry’s realization of who his father was. The final reconciliation between father and son is also a sign that Henry reached a deep awareness of the meaning of life, which radiates different colors, just as we see the whole picture of life in a mandala.

Notes

¹ The Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act 1919 (9 & 10 Geo 5 c 92) has an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom originally aimed at continuing and extending the provisions of the Aliens Restriction Act 1914 and to deal with former enemy aliens after the end of the First World War.

² A cry for help. “Help!” (Rosten)

³ Man, human being, responsible/ mature person. (Weinreich)

⁴ “Shlepped His Kishkes Out For me”=did his best but with great effort and even sacrifice.

⁵ Nondescript idler. (Harkavy)

⁶ pissed

⁷ To drag. (Harkavy)

⁸ Guts. (Harkavy)

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